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"Crimes That Delight Us": Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*

1. Introduction: Ackroyd's London

The setting of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* exemplifies the writer's view of London as composed of multiple layers of history and tradition which coexist and accrue to constitute its identity. Likewise, his other novels – *Hawksmoor*, *The great fire of London*, *The house of Doctor Dee* as well his fanciful history of the city, entitled *London: the biography* convey the writer's notion of London as a living being, overpowering and determining the lives of its inhabitants. Despite its mutability and the multifariousness of its material shape, London, in Ackroyd's view, retains its stable identity *sub specie aeternitatis*. In his essay "Some old haunts" the writer conveys his impressions of London's streets:

> it is possible to walk down a street and glimpse a face, or gesture, which seems to have sprung from some past time. These same gestures and movements, even the very words themselves, have been repeated and revived over many generations in that precise place. I have seen medieval faces, Elizabethan faces, eighteenth-century faces, and in that recognition I realized that in London it is possible to understand everything within the eye of eternity. (qtd. in Keen 2000: 15)

As represented by Ackroyd, London is essentially split into its visible, changeable, material form and its immaterial, unchanging spirit. The visible provides clues as to the nature of the city's core being: the labyrinthine quality of the network of streets, the coexistence of respectable and disreputable districts and the overwhelming size of London make the city appear powerful, sinister, even predatory, capable of transforming, engulfing, elevating or destroying its residents.

The ubiquitous London fog in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* brings to mind Dickens's memorable depiction in *Bleak House*:

> Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds. (Dickens 1996: 13)

In Ackroyd's novel, *Bleak House* is read by Karl Marx, one of the habitués of the Reading Room in the British Museum. To Marx, as to many of his contemporaries, the fog as a product of industrialism predominantly connotes social oppression. Among the readers who rub shoulders with Marx in the British Museum is George Gissing, the author of *The nether world* – a naturalistic representation of the slums of nineteenth-century London. Nonetheless, despite his interest in the scientific approach advocated by Zola, Gissing was unable to entirely purge his style of "the romantic, the rhetorical and the picturesque" (Ackroyd 1998: 136–137). In his other novel *Workers in the dawn* Gissing – as the narrator puts it – "bathed the city in an iridescent glow and turned its inhabitants into stage heroes or stage crowds on the model of the sensation plays in the penny gaffs. [. . .] This was not the language of a realist" (Ackroyd 1998: 137).

In Oscar Wilde's "The decay of lying" it is argued that London fog is an aesthetic rather than a real entity:

> At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them about the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist until Art had invented them. (Wilde 1891a: 33–34)

In Victorian London, the fog became, to use Eliot's term, an objective correlative of murder and mystery. The narrator of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* indicates the literary significance of the fog, which insinuated itself into the imagination of the Victorians to such an extent as

to constitute a powerful metaphorical background to both industrial and crime novels set in London at the end of the nineteenth century:

> The notorious pea-soupers of the period, so ably memorialised by Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Conan Doyle, were quite as dark as their literary reputation would suggest; but it was the smell and the taste of the fog which most affected Londoners. Their lungs seemed to be filled with the quintessence of coal dust, while their tongues and nostrils were caked with a substance which was known colloquially as "miners' phlegm." Perhaps that was why the Reading Room of the British Museum was unusually crowded on that raw September morning when John Cree arrived . . .
>
> (Ackroyd 1998: 43)

The voices of the readers, many of whom are based on real-life late nineteenth century writers, merge and rise towards the dome of the Reading Room and set up "a whispering echo like that of the voices in the fog of London" (Ackroyd 1998: 47). Accordingly, it is on a foggy night that John Cree nearly murders Karl Marx as they both leave the British Museum. Marx fails to detect the sinister undertones in Cree's remark that it is "[a] fine night for a murder" (Ackroyd 1998: 59). With his eyes set on the distant prospect of revolutionary bloodshed, Marx dismisses murder as "a bourgeois preoccupation" (Ackroyd 1998: 59), never suspecting how close he came to falling victim to bourgeois pastimes. The notorious 1811 murder of the Williamsons, so eloquently described in Thomas De Quincey's essay "On murder considered as one of the fine arts" – Cree's favourite reading – was also committed on a night when "London, from east to west, was covered with a deep pall (rising from the river) of universal fog" (De Quincey 1890: 111).

In Ackroyd's fiction, the dominance of the city's eternal spirit over its temporary embodiments, paradoxically, makes the latter appear somewhat unreal since what happens in London at a given time is an incarnation, a repetition and reenactment of a timeless pattern. The patterns in the history of London can be detected by studying its history, rituals, and, above all, the literary tradition that has accumulated in it over the centuries. Hence the plots of Ackroyd's historical novels, including *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, are underlain by a distancing effect related to the theatricality of representation. London as conceived of by Ackroyd is "a central locale for the celebration of a native English tradition of spectacle, ritual observances, and festive burlesque. Ackroyd

knows London by heart – knows it as Dickens, or Blake, or Thomas More would have known it" (Keen 2000: 14). Petr Chalupský points out that "[u]rban life as a theatre is one of the key metaphors in his conception of London" (2008: 117).

2. The Art of Lying

Ackroyd's techniques in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* – playful allusiveness, multiple points of view and multiple narratives which ultimately are denied an authoritative denouement – have correctly been described as an instance of "twentieth-century sophistication" (Hutchings 1997: 149), but it must be noted that Ackroyd's insistence on literary patterns determining the characters' actions is also ascribable to attitudes prevalent in the last decades of the nineteenth century, which he recreates in his novel – the rising fin-de-siècle prioritisition of art over experience. As Oscar Wilde, one of the literary celebrities glimpsed in the world of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, insisted in "The decay of lying," "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (Wilde 1891a: 44). Hence, although *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* is ostensibly a crime story, it pursues the central question of whodunit in a conspicuously insouciant fashion. The opening of the novel reveals that a certain Elizabeth Cree was executed for the supposed poisoning of her husband, although the woman had denied her guilt, claiming that his death had been accidental. However, in defiance of the reader's expectations, the subsequent chapters, rather than exploring the problem of Elizabeth's guilt, concentrate on the much more gruesome crimes committed by her husband. And yet, the ending of the novel unsettles the reader's understanding once again by casting doubt on John Cree's responsibility for the murders attributed to the Limehouse Golem. In the end, it is Elizabeth that appears to be the culprit, but no objective narrator corroborates her confession. Nevertheless, the lack of a definitive resolution cannot frustrate the reader since in the course of the novel the pursuit of truth, which is typical of detective fiction, has been displaced by the pursuit of the art of deception and imitation. "The art of deception" may be a tautology in the context of the novel – the Platonic concept of art, favoured by fin-de-siècle culture, equates art with lying. In "The decay of lying," Wilde asserted that "[l]ying and poetry are arts – arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other" (1891a: 8) and "the aim of

the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure" (1891a: 24). Accordingly, in the Preface to *The picture of Dorian Gray* the writer claimed that "[n]o artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved" (1992: 3).

In that same Preface, written a few years after the (fictional) Limehouse murders depicted in Ackroyd's book, Oscar Wilde also said that "[v]ice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art" (1992: 3). The narrator of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* forges a link between Dorian Gray's (and his creator's) quest for perilous sensations in the opium dens and cheap theatres of East London, and the grim reputation that Limehouse gained following the series of murders. But it would not be quite correct to say that it is the writer's mode of representation that transmutes murder into art[1] – in the novel, murder is from its inception planned and undertaken as an artistic performance.

3. The Art of Murder

The serial crimes attributed to the Limehouse Golem are inspired by De Quincey's 1827 essay "On murder considered as one of the fine arts." The narrator of the essay, a connoisseur of the art of murder, attends a club of like-minded individuals who discuss the incidence of murder, both ancient and modern, in a grotesquely learned way. Murder is approached in a strictly aesthetic mode:

> If [a man] is not in a downright comatose state, I suppose that he must see that one murder is better or worse than another, in point of good taste. Murders have their little differences and shades of merit, as well as statues, pictures, oratorios, cameos, intaglios, or what not. (De Quincey 1890: 52)

To John Cree (although his authorship of the diary in which the murders are recounted is later called into question – like so much else in the story, the diary may be a fake), De Quincey's essay is both a pleasure to read and an impulse to act and to imitate the sensations it depicts: "his work has been a source of perpetual delight and astonishment to me"

[1] Cf. the protagonist's argument in "On murder considered as one of the fine arts": after a murder "comes the turn of Taste and the Fine Arts. A sad thing it was, no doubt, very sad; but *we* can't mend it. Therefore let us make the best of a bad matter; and, as it is impossible to hammer anything out of it for moral purposes, let us treat it aesthetically, and see if it will turn to account in that way" (De Quincey 1890: 16).

(Ackroyd 1998: 30). Cree is particularly impressed by the narrator's ability to cast the notorious murders committed by John Williams in the mode of dramatic art. In 1811 public opinion in London was shocked to hear of the murder of the Marr family in Ratcliffe Highway ("a murder the most superb of the century," according to the protagonist of De Quincey's essay (1890: 58)), and, a little later, further terrified by the cruel extermination of the Williamson family in the same district ("the second work [. . .] from the same chisel – some people pronounced even superior" (De Quincey 1890: 58)). According to the account given in the essay, the murderer, like a true artist, was driven by a desire for an aesthetic effect. He dressed up to play his part and chose his setting carefully, using London as a vast studio in which to display his work.

Wishing to repeat Williams's exploit, Cree plans to murder the entire family that now lives where the Marrs previously resided. Yet, intimidated by such an antecedent masterpiece in the art of murder, Cree decides to practise before delivering his own *chef-d'œvre*: "I was a mere tyro, a beginner, an understudy who could not appear on the great stage without rehearsal. [. . .] I was still in my own particular private theatre, this garish spot beneath the gas lamps, and here I must perform. But at first, let it be behind the curtain . . ." (Ackroyd 1998: 26–27). The opening of the novel, objectively recounting the gruesome details of the murder and mutilation of two prostitutes and a Jewish scholar in the Limehouse district of East London, is contrasted with subsequent extracts from the diary in which the murderer records his deeds from the perspective of an aesthete. His knife is described as "a lovely object with a carved ivory handle" and likened to a pen with which an artist writes his name on a sheet of paper in the hope of attaining fame. Yet the first "performance" proves disappointing since details of the crime are hushed up and so it fails to make the desired impact on the public. The murderer is determined to leave a mark for everyone to notice next time. Consequently, the mutilated body of the next victim is laid out on the river bank with the intention of creating "a spectacle that no eye seeing it could fail to be moved." In a grim echo of Shakespeare, the murderer delights in the dismembered body as material for an artist: "What a work is man, how subtle in faculties and how infinite in entrails!" (Ackroyd 1998: 62).

The response of the public is a predictable combination of shock and ghoulish interest in the ghastly atrocities. The serial murders quickly acquire the status of an urban myth, with their perpetrator achieving the

desired rank of a modern anti-hero. The growth of the legend of the Limehouse Golem was not intentional on the part of the murderer, but he welcomes it as an unexpected boost to the notoriety he seeks. While killing the Jewish scholar, Cree finds in Solomon Weil's study a book fortuitously opened at a page expounding the concept of the golem. Cree readily avails himself of the opportunity to embellish the act of murder with references to the sinister figure from the Jewish tradition. As the artist that he considers himself to be, the murderer improvises a grisly exhibition of the book and the victim's genitals, counting on the effect of a mysterious ritual supposedly involved in the murder.

Before he was attacked by "the Limehouse Golem," Weil had proclaimed with unsuspected aptness that while a golem did not objectively exist, people imagined it into being: "We give it life in our own image. We breathe our own spirit into its shape" (Ackroyd 1998: 68). A golem is an artificial being, a form without a spirit, which is why it needs a living human being to invade and possess. Given the incentive, the press and the public collectively invent the Limehouse Golem. The Golem, whether a supernatural creature or a flesh-and-blood man (or woman, for that matter), seems to embody the spirit of London. The legend grows quickly, fuelled by collective speculations. The public response to the crimes corresponds to the criminal's motivation – the Londoners are excited rather than outraged, eager for more news, and ready to cooperate with the murderer in the creation of his myth:

> The brutal murder of the Jewish scholar, only six days after that of the prostitute in the same area, provoked a frenzied interest among ordinary Londoners. It was almost as if they had been waiting impatiently for these murders to happen – as if the new conditions of the metropolis required some vivid identification, some flagrant confirmation of its status as the largest and darkest city of the world. (Ackroyd 1998: 88)

Although the murderer privately asserts that he is not the mythological figure that the newspapers have fashioned him to be, he regards himself as reenacting timeless patterns inherent in the nature of the city; hence the murder of the shopkeepers' family on the site of the ill-famed Marr murders should be, in his eyes, "a great testimony to the power of the city over men" (Ackroyd 1998: 160). Never stopping to consider the atrocious nature of his actions but savouring their purely dramatic quality, Cree treats this murder as a splendid replica of the crime committed

by the master-murderer John Williams. "The play has just begun," Cree says to one of his victims as he cuts his throat (Ackroyd 1998: 161).

There are, however, direct links between the Limehouse murders and the exuberant world of late Victorian theatre. The pantomimes and music hall shows produced in nineteenth-century London often explored violence and cruelty, typically turning them into a source of low humour. Cree finds further vindication for his pursuit of the art of murder in (what he claims is) De Quincey's definition of pantomime as a performance including "clown atrocity or crimes that delight us" (Ackroyd 1998: 191). One of the plays that John and Elizabeth Cree watch together is a comic production of *Bluebeard*, where, in an atmosphere of domestic farce, a woman is viciously tormented and killed on stage. The audience enjoys the verbal and situational humour of the play as much as it secretly relishes the gruesome details of the Limehouse murders. At the entrance to the theatre, people discuss the recent crimes as if they were also products of the current sensationalist trend in the theatre. John Cree is pleased to observe that "Londoners love a good killing, on stage or off, and two of the wittier gentlemen were comparing the Limehouse Golem with Bluebeard himself" (Ackroyd 1998: 166). As a spectator, Cree is thrilled in anticipation of the murder ("I laughed as loud as anyone, because I knew that there was a murder in the air" (Ackroyd 1998: 167)), just as he earlier trembled with excitement before his first killing ("It was a fine bright morning, and I could feel a murder coming on" (Ackroyd 1998: 24)).

In the course of the police investigation, uncanny connections are discovered between the murders and Dan Leno,[2] one of the leading actors of London's popular theatre, which temporarily make Dan Leno a suspect. It turns out that one of the slaughtered prostitutes had been planning to see Dan Leno's pantomime the night she was murdered (and so became an unwilling participant in someone else's show); the other died dressed up in a costume from one of his plays, while the murdered Gerrard family used to sell second-hand clothes cast off by the actor. Closer examination reveals, however, that Dan Leno's part in the crimes is theatrical rather than criminal – by providing the future victims with costumes Dan Leno unwittingly helped the murderer to create the desired effect of murder as a fine art, whereas by acting out crimes on stage he helped to create among his audience a taste for violence.

[2] An authentic figure.

Although the police become confident regarding Dan Leno's innocence, they quite rightly suspect that the murders must be linked to the world of artistic make-believe. The investigation reveals parallels between the Golem's crimes and those described in De Quincey's essay, designated by the police as the murderer's "prompt-book": "there are too many resemblances for it [the murder] to be entirely natural" (Ackroyd 1998: 204). Both Dan Leno and the investigators detect ostensible artifice in the Limehouse atrocities:

> "Much of it doesn't seem real at all."
> "Of course, the deaths were real enough."
> "Yes but, as you say, the atmosphere surrounding them, the newspaper paragraphs, the crowds of spectators – it's like being in some kind of penny gaff or theatre of variety." (Ackroyd 1998: 205)

As the narrator of "On murder considered as one of the fine arts" notes, "the tendency to a critical or aesthetic valuation of fires and murders is universal" (De Quincey 1890: 72). Accordingly, he recounts the murder of the Marrs as if he were offering his readers a spectacle: "Let us [. . .], in vision, attach ourselves to Mary [the servant in the household]; and, when all is over, let us come back with *her*, again raise the curtain, and read the dreadful account of all that has passed in her absence" (De Quincey 1890: 85).

The fact that the identity of the Limehouse Golem remains elusive is due to the fluidity of the boundary between art and reality. The fanciful evidence given to the police by members of the public and the absence of a tangible motive for the murders obstruct the investigation. The duplicity of John Cree, revealed by his diary, is comparable to the hypocrisy of Doctor Jekyll, whose sinister double was to stalk the foggy streets of London a few years later. Outwardly a scholarly-minded man, a devoted husband and a frequent visitor to the British Museum, John Cree in his secret life successfully plays a very different role.

4. Conclusion: The Art of Imitation

Cree's imitation of someone else's "performance" is a *mise-en-abyme* of the ontological status of Ackroyd's novel. *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* imitates late Victorian fiction and tries to recreate the quality of life in London at the end of the nineteenth century; further, the action

presents multiple layers of impersonation and imitation. If John Cree emulates the early nineteenth-century murderer, he also impersonates the mythical Golem.

Before her marriage, Elizabeth Cree was a successful actress, known for cross-dressing. The book poses also the possibility that it is Elizabeth Cree that impersonates her husband impersonating the original murderer and the Golem. Even at the time when the verdict in her poisoning case is pronounced, Elizabeth is inclined to treat the scene as yet another performance, and can only bring herself to reflect that the judge is too florid and too fat for the part of Pantaloon in the pantomime. Her seemingly incongruous last words "Here we are again!" recur in the book, emphasising the pattern of repetition and impersonation. Elizabeth's trial and execution, predictably enough, are immediately taken up as a pantomime story. The final twist in the tale comes when the actress who plays Elizabeth really dies on stage, due to a technical failure. The audience appreciates the closeness of the performance to reality, not suspecting that the boundary between life and art has been obfuscated once again. As in the case of the Golem's murders, the performance is fine, but the death is real enough. Actors, true to their profession, quickly convert this death into art, thus anticipating Oscar Wilde's remark in "The truth of masks" (quoted in Ackroyd's novel 1998: 281) that "Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure" (Wilde 1891b: 199). Dan Leno sustains the dramatic illusion by replacing the dead actress who played Elizabeth. He emerges on the stage, impersonating the former actress Elizabeth Cree dressed up for one of her famous roles. His words "Here we are again!", the last in the novel, not only echo Elizabeth's last words, but implicitly encapsulate the central strategy employed in the novel.

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